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ABSTRACT

This brief paper summarizes warning signs of learning disabilities in preschool children, elementary school children, and secondary school children. It notes that learning disabilities are presumed to arise from dysfunctions in the brain resulting in significant difficulties in perceiving information, processing and/or remembering information, and/or in expressing information. For preschool children warning signs are listed in the areas of language (e.g., difficulty learning new words), motor skills (clumsiness), cognition (difficulty with basic concepts), attention (high distractibility), and social behavior (easily frustrated). For elementary school children, warning signs are listed for language/mathematics (consistent reading and spelling errors), motor skills (poor coordination), attention/organization (difficulty finishing work on time), and social behavior (apparent lack of "common sense"). And for secondary school children, warning signs are listed for the areas of language/mathematics/social studies (avoidance of reading and writing), attention/organization (difficulty staying organized), and social behavior (difficulty accepting criticism). (DB)

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The Warning Signs of Learning Disabilities

Susan Bergert

Something's not quite right about Johnny. He seems bright enough, but often his performance or behavior falls short of expectations. He can do some things very well, but in other ways is behind his peers. Is he simply lazy? Does he just need to try harder?

When the development or academic performance of a healthy child falls short of what is expected for his or her age and intelligence, parents or teachers may suspect the child has a learning disability (LD). Being aware of the signs of learning disabilities will help parents determine if the child should be referred for evaluation. This digest summarizes some of the common warning signs of learning disabilities for preschool, elementary, and secondary school children and youth.

As the name implies, LD is a condition that affects learning, and sooner or later is manifested by poor school performance, especially in reading, mathematics, spelling, and writing. In addition, LD is a life-long condition, and can significantly impact relationships, daily activities, and eventually work and careers.

Learning disabilities are presumed to arise from dysfunctions in the brain. Individuals with learning disabilities have significant difficulties in perceiving information (input), in processing and remembering information (integration) and/or in expressing information (output). Outward manifestations of any of these difficulties serve as indicators—or warning signs—of a learning disability.

Warning Signs in Preschool Children

Although children's growth patterns vary among individuals and within individuals, uneven development or significant delays in development can signal the presence of LD. It is important to keep in mind that the behaviors listed below must persist over time to be considered warning signs. Any child may occasionally exhibit one or two of these behaviors in the course of normal development.

Language

- Slow development in speaking words or sentences
- Pronunciation problems
- Difficulty learning new words
- Difficulty following simple directions
- Difficulty understanding questions
- Difficulty expressing wants and desires
- Difficulty rhyming words
- Lack of interest in story telling

Motor Skills

- Clumsiness
- Poor balance
- Difficulty manipulating small objects
- Awkwardness with running, jumping, or climbing
- Trouble learning to tie shoes, button shirts, or perform other self-help activities
- Avoidance of drawing or tracing

Cognition

- Trouble memorizing the alphabet or days of the week
- Poor memory for what should be routine (everyday) procedures
- Difficulty with cause and effect, sequencing, and counting
- Difficulty with basic concepts such as size, shape, color

Attention

- High distractibility
- Impulsive behavior
- Unusual restlessness (hyperactivity)
- Difficulty staying on task
- Difficulty changing activities
- Constant repetition of an idea, inability to move on to a new idea (perseveration)

Social Behavior

- Trouble interacting with others, playing alone
- Prone to sudden and extreme mood changes
- Easily frustrated
- Hard to manage, has temper tantrums

Because early intervention is so important, federal law requires that school districts provide early identification and intervention services. The special education department of the local school district can direct families to the agency that provides these services. Families may also want to consult the child's doctor, who should also be able to refer the family to appropriate resources.

Warning Signs in Elementary School Children

It is during the elementary school years that learning problems frequently become apparent as disabilities interfere with increasingly demanding and complex learning tasks. Difficulties in learning academic subjects and emotional and/or social skills may become a problem. Warning signs for this

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age group may include any of those listed above for preschool children in addition to the following.

Language/Mathematics

- Slow learning of the correspondence of sound to letter
- Consistent errors in reading or spelling
- Difficulty remembering basic sight words
- Inability to retell a story in sequence
- Trouble learning to tell time or count money
- Confusion of math signs (+, -, x, /, =)
- Transposition of number sequences
- Trouble memorizing math facts
- Trouble with place value
- Difficulty remembering the steps of mathematic operations such as long division

Motor Skills

- Poor coordination, or awkwardness
- Difficulty copying from chalkboard
- Difficulty aligning columns (math)
- Poor handwriting

Attention/Organization

- Difficulty concentrating or focusing on a task
- Difficulty finishing work on time
- Inability to follow multiple directions
- Unusual sloppiness, carelessness
- Poor concept of direction (left, right)
- Rejection of new concepts, or changes in routine

Social Behavior

- Difficulty understanding facial expressions or gestures
- Difficulty understanding social situations
- Tendency to misinterpret behavior of peers and/or adults
- Apparent lack of "common sense"

If teachers have not discussed the possibility of an evaluation already, the parents may request that the child's school conduct a formal evaluation. A request submitted to the school principal must be honored by the school system in a timely manner.

Warning Signs in Secondary School Children

Some learning disabilities go undetected until secondary school. Physical changes occurring during adolescence and the increased demands of middle and senior high school may bring the disabilities to light. Previously satisfactory performance declines. Inappropriate social skills may lead to changes in peer relationships and discipline problems. Increased frustration and poor self-concepts can lead to depression and /or angry outbursts. Warning signs of learning disabilities in secondary school students include the following, which again, should occur as a pattern of behaviors, to a significant degree, and over time.

Language/Mathematics/Social Studies

- Avoidance of reading and writing
- Tendency to misread information
- Difficulty summarizing
- Poor reading comprehension
- Difficulty understanding subject area textbooks
- Trouble with open-ended questions
- Continued poor spelling
- Poor grasp of abstract concepts
- Poor skills in writing essays
- Difficulty in learning foreign language
- Poor ability to apply math skills

Attention/Organization

- Difficulty staying organized
- Trouble with test formats such as multiple choice
- Slow work pace in class and in testing situations
- Poor note taking skills
- Poor ability to proofread or double check work

Social Behavior

- Difficulty accepting criticism
- Difficulty seeking or giving feedback
- Problems negotiating or advocating for oneself
- Difficulty resisting peer pressure
- Difficulty understanding another person's perspectives

Again, parents have the right to request an evaluation by the public schools to determine if the student has learning disabilities.

Summary

Research has shown that the sooner LD is detected and intervention is begun, the better the chance to avoid school failure and to improve chances for success in life. When parents or teachers suspect a child has learning disabilities, they should seek evaluation.

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